

Peculiarities of the distance-education form of teaching foreign language to students of a linguistic higher education institution

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Abstract - This article discusses specific features and peculiarities of distance learning using the latest information technologies. According to the authors, distance learning provides virtually unlimited possibilities for using a personal computer in the process of studying. In linguistic education, the need for intensive implementation of the distance-learning mode of interaction between the parties of the educational process is subject to both socio-economic and subject-specific factors. The authors describe the possibilities of distance education in learning a foreign language at a university level. In the course of this work, the authors are raising and resolving the questions of both the definition of distance learning (a broad view of the problem) and the understanding of its essence and its role in teaching foreign language communication (a detailed look at the problem). This article identifies significant theoretical prerequisites for establishing the role and didactic potential of teaching foreign languages by means of telecommunications. Furthermore, the article establishes linguodidactic possibilities of distance learning in the context of linguistic education and reveals how this type of education functions in the context of educating linguists.

Key words - distance education, telecommunication technologies, foreign-language acquisition, communicative competence

I. INTRODUCTION

Within this article, it is of fundamental importance for us to ascertain the specifics of distance learning and teaching in a language higher-education institution (university level) and to determine the optimal conditions for its effective implementation in this educational context.

Despite the obvious current interest in studying foreign languages by means of distance learning, the problem of effectively organising this process remains open. There are still concerns that distance learning cannot be equal in its comparison with the traditional form of education in a linguistic university, because the indirect interaction of the teacher and students, as it is believed, imposes some restrictions in the mastery of foreign language communication. This scepticism about the new form of

education seems to have its reasons. One of them can be confidently attributed to the lack of productivity of independent activity of students in the remote form of mastery of a foreign language, weak (delayed in time) supervision of the self-study on the part of the teacher, the impossibility to correct immediately any ineffective educational activity.

In determining the essence of distance learning, we adhere to the interpretation of A.V. Khutorskoy, who interprets this form as follows: distance learning is learning in which the subjects of education (students, teachers, tutors etc.) have a spatial or temporal distance from each other and from the means of education, and the learning process is carried out using telecommunications, including the internet [1]. In this context, this form assumes the character of "network technologies" [2], or "computer-aided distance education" [3].

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS (MODEL)

"Computer-aided distance **education** is the training of geographically remote students with the **use of various new information technologies for delivery of educational material and access to remote resources**" [3]. The main feature of such education (in contrast to the traditional one) is the use of computers as a new and dynamically developing means of teaching, the use of which radically changes the system of forms and methods of teaching. In this sense, computer-based distance learning significantly differs from other distance learning systems that are currently available on the market of educational services.

Considering this, distance learning does not contradict other forms of organising the educational process and is easily integrated with them. This is shown in a number of studies (A.A. Andreyev, M.I. Starov, et al). Furthermore, sometimes, it is stated that the distance form of education using computer networks should not replace training a **specialist**, but should be **organically introduced** into the integral process of training [4]. The rationale for this view of the situation was a fair statement that the existing international practices in applying distance-learning models

"without making any adjustments and without adapting to the «Russian mentality»" [ibidem] and, we add, without taking into account the specifics and traditions of the system of higher professional education in Russia, is not acceptable. That is why, as we believe, the studies of the subject point at the need to take into account the principle of non-antagonism of distance learning towards existing forms of education. According to this principle, implemented information technologies should not become a foreign element in the traditional system of higher education, they should be naturally integrated into it. R.K. Potapova writes about this, in particular, pointing to the specific consumers of the foreign language distance-learning system [3].

Given the specifics of linguistic education, we believe that all of the above can fully refer to the system of training future linguists. The spectrum of the educational objectives here is so broad and diverse, the need for full mastery of the norms of the target language, social and cultural differences and behaviour is so important and unwavering, that speaking about implementing a purely remote form of training future linguists (like schools of external studies/ open universities/ autonomous educational systems) seems impossible in this point in time. Such authors as E.S. Polat, M.Yu. Bukharkina and E.I. Dmitrieva write about this very issue, although, in relation to secondary school. They argue that "teaching foreign languages by distance education, as well as distance learning in general - in various subjects within the curriculum or as part of extra-curricular education - are not intended to replace full-time education <...>, but to supplement it with a view to deepen or expand the knowledge provided by the school curriculum" [5]. Integration of full-time education and distance learning is actually considered to be the most promising model [6]. Its implementation will help to neutralise the shortcomings of the classroom-based system, which is currently claimed to be "a brake in the intellectual development of students" [ibid: 85].

It seems that the aforementioned becomes even more important within the framework of linguistic education. Unfortunately, we have to state that the study of the possibilities of distance learning in this specific educational context has revealed its weak implementation both in theoretical and practical terms. Analysis of the existing literature shows that, so far, especially evident interest towards distance education in learning languages is manifested in the field of non-specialised (non-linguistic) education: in secondary schools (A.V. Khutorskoy, E.I. Dmitrieva, R. Oxford, E.S. Polat, L.P. Khalyapina, et al.), in non-linguistic universities (R. Oxford), when teaching Russian as a foreign language (I.Ya. Lerner). In this regard, it can be stated that, at the moment, there is practically no study being conducted, either in theory or in practice, on the subject of the optimal use of distance learning in training linguists.

However, it cannot be argued that no linguodidactic basis for such training has been created and investigated. To date, an extensive database of computer-based linguistic and didactic materials has been accumulated, which could serve as a basis for including distance learning into the traditional linguistic education. Every educational institution nowadays has a certain set of copyrighted computer-based linguodidactic materials at their disposal, which can be

actively used in the implementation of distance learning of foreign language communication. We believe that at present there is a need to solve the issues related to how to improve the efficiency of traditional forms of teaching foreign language communication through the remote mode of interaction with the student.

It should be noted that the possibilities and rationale behind distance learning in higher education are indeed discussed in the subject literature. At the same time, there are objective difficulties in forming foreign-language communicative competence with the whole range of its components. Indeed, the spectrum of the socially required goals to be achieved in linguistic education is increasing.

To date, we know few works aimed at improving distance methods of teaching foreign language communication in a language university (Education by Correspondence..., 2003, A.S. Markova, 2002, T.P. Popova, 1999, T.P. Sarana, 2004, I.A. Subach, 2003). They relate mainly to the initial stage of training and consider different aspects of the educational process and different components of educational activities. It should be noted that nowadays, the tendency to use the opportunities and advantages of distance learning in training language students is sporadically beginning to emerge, among other tendencies.

In these works, it is argued that distance forms of learning incorporated into traditional linguistic education help to overcome the following disadvantages of the traditional education:

- lack of direct contact with native speakers,
- limited access to printed foreign publications,
- difficulty transmitting rapidly information of any volume and any kind to any distance (audio and video, static and dynamic, texts and graphics),
- lack of direct and fast interaction necessary for monitoring, evaluating and managing the learning process;
- complexity/impossibility to organise joint educational and communicative activities of the subjects of the learning process,
- inertia of the training system that limits the learning process to reproductive methods, tests and exams.

In the professional literature, one can find the grounds that differentiate between the full-time and distance forms of education. To confirm this, we reference the authors of some of the latest scientific works. They point to the following differences:

"1. The keyword of distance learning is interactivity – constant systematic interaction between teachers and students in the learning process.

2. <...> A full-time education course and a distance-learning course differ from each other fundamentally – in terms of organising educational material and its structure, in the way the teacher and students interact with each other, in terms of organising information and the educational environment of the learning process. Methods and forms of training are also fundamentally different due to the internet technologies used.

3. The system of managing cognitive activity of students also depends on the specifics of the internet services used" [6].

However, distance-learning and classroom-based training do have a number of similarities, which may help them to interact and converge both organisationally and in terms of content. Analysis of the specialised literature on issues of describing education by correspondence (A.S. Markova, V.P. Sarana) and distance education (E.I. Dmitrieva, E.S. Polat, R.K. Potapova, A.V. Khutorskoy, D. Casida, J.B. Wen, W. Zhang, W.N. Shu.) has led us to the following conclusions. Distance learning for students is characterised by the following features:

- simultaneous coverage of a large number of students and, at the same time, a minimum number of teachers;
- geographical distance from the teacher and other students;
- possibility to study while being employed;
- training according to your own schedule;
- independence of students in mastering the content of training;
- opportunity to immediately apply their knowledge in practice.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the above, we consider it appropriate to focus on the process of integrative use of distance learning and full-time classroom-based education. To amplify the significance of this integration, we have analysed the **linguodidactic potential of distance learning**. Based on the definition of E.S. Polat [5] and on the interpretation of the concept of "the potential", by linguodidactic potential of distance learning, we mean those main characteristics of this form of education that distinguish it from others and can have a significant impact on improving the efficiency of linguistic education.

We distinguish the following 6 main manifestations of the linguodidactic potential of distant learning in the subject context:

1. Providing a real process of communication (not pseudo-communication), which can be carried out both in writing and orally. This will help students to experience interactivity as a property of the communication process, due to the reaction of a live interlocutor, even though it can be an indirect reaction.

2. Students experiencing plentiful, intensive process of communication with remote partners, whereby this process is not limited to the framework of a purposefully educational process. Being spatially relatively isolated from the teacher and other students like him/her, the student acquires the opportunity to communicate with various communicants, and this process is not limited in time or space and is not dictated by an educational curriculum.

3. Possibility to have a diversity of communication partners. Foreign language communication becomes unlimited for the student in terms of quantity and volume. It

can be carried out by means of various types of telecommunication exchange of information: telephone- and video calls, correspondence by e-mail, conversations in chats, etc. This naturally stimulates the motivation to improve their own communicative competence, aids the development of linguistic skills and enriches the social and cultural thesaurus, etc.

4. Communication with native speakers. This allows the student to establish an authentic communicative contact, enter into communication with a native-speaker and experience a real-life situation of intercultural communication that is not "acted out for educational purposes", without having to imitate or invent it.

5. Reducing the traditional language barrier, which is noticeable particularly with students. Within such communication, students are not "pressured" by the authority of the teacher, do not feel daunted or embarrassed or feel an "inferiority complex", they can give free rein to their creative imagination. The participants of the telecommunication feel safe from criticism or "persecution" for their mistakes.

6. Providing free, unlimited access to sources of knowledge about the culture of the target language country in the form of electronic dictionaries, reference books, encyclopaedias, samples of music or theatre culture, virtual museums, virtual excursions to attractions, etc. The student will be able to find a lot of authentic information and use it to update all types of their linguistic activities.

IV. CONCLUSION

To this end, distance learning is an effective form of education that allows to improve significantly the efficiency of the system of teaching students foreign language communication. It is necessary, therefore, to investigate intensively the potential of such an integrative form of education and to develop certain concepts and technologies within the framework of this theory that contribute to optimisation of educational activities of students.

An important theoretical thesis, which could be deduced in the context of this article, concerns the specifics of the distance/full-time education of the students who are future linguists. We have considered the following disadvantages of full-time training of future linguists: impossibility of having direct contacts with native speakers, limited access to printed foreign-language sources of information, having difficulty in quickly transferring information to any distance, the impossibility to have direct and immediate interaction, having difficulty in organising joint learning activities, reproductive methods and techniques used by students. We have shown the necessity to introduce distance learning in order to a) implement it in preparation of specialists-linguists, b) improve the education of students of language universities, c) overcome the objective difficulties related to educating bilinguals. At the same time, the linguodidactic potential of distance education, when introduced into the full-time training of students – future linguists, is to provide a real, abundant, intensive process of communication with various remote communication partners, including native speakers. The traditional language barrier is reduced; free, unrestricted access to sources of

knowledge about the culture of the country of the target language is provided.

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